



From Roots to Routes: Migration and Identity in Indian Diaspora Literature

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Received: 25 Dec 2025; Received in revised form: 28 Jan 2026; Accepted: 03 Feb 2026; Available online: 09 Feb 2026
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Abstract— Migration has been one of the defining experiences of the Indian diaspora, reshaping notions of identity, belonging, and cultural memory. Indian diaspora literature captures the complex transition from 'roots', symbolizing origin and homeland, to 'routes', representing movement, displacement, and transnational existence. In Indian diasporic literature, the act of crossing borders is rarely just a physical journey; it is a psychological transformation. For writers of the Indian diaspora, "identity" is not a fixed label but a fluid process of negotiation between the desh (homeland) and the videsh (host land). This paper examines how Indian diasporic writers negotiate identity in the context of migration, cultural hybridity, and alienation. Drawing on theoretical insights from diaspora studies and postcolonial criticism, and analyzing selected works by writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, and Bharati Mukherjee, the paper argues that Indian diaspora literature reflects identity as fluid, hybrid, and continually reconstructed across spaces.



Keywords— Indian Diaspora, Migration, Identity, Hybridity, Transnationalism, Post colonial, Fluid

I. INTRODUCTION

The term Indian diaspora refers to the large community of people of Indian origin living outside the geographical boundaries of India. Spread across continents such as Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, the Caribbean, and Oceania, the Indian diaspora is one of the largest and most diverse diasporas in the world. It represents a complex history of migration, cultural exchange, adaptation, and identity formation. Historically, the Indian diaspora can be traced back to ancient times through trade, commerce, and cultural contacts. Indian merchants, scholars, and religious teachers travelled to Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and parts of Africa, leaving lasting cultural influences. However, the modern Indian diaspora largely emerged during the colonial period. Under British rule, Indians were taken as indentured labourers to plantations in countries such as Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, South Africa, and Sri Lanka. These migrants faced harsh working conditions but gradually established stable communities abroad.

In the post-independence period, a new phase of migration began. Educated professionals, students, and

skilled workers moved to countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia in search of better economic opportunities. This phase is often described as voluntary migration, unlike the forced or semi-forced migration of the colonial era. As a result, the Indian diaspora today includes people from varied socio-economic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Culturally, the Indian diaspora has played a significant role in preserving and promoting Indian traditions while also adapting to host societies. Festivals such as Diwali, Holi, and Navratri are celebrated across the globe, and Indian languages, cuisine, music, and cinema have gained international recognition. At the same time, diasporic communities experience cultural hybridity, negotiating between their Indian heritage and the values of the host nation. This negotiation often leads to questions of identity, belonging, and home. The Indian diaspora has also made notable contributions to the economic and political life of host countries. Many people of Indian origin have achieved success in fields such as science, technology, medicine, business, literature, and politics. Remittances sent by overseas Indians contribute

significantly to India's economy, strengthening ties between India and its diaspora. In literature and cultural studies, the Indian diaspora has become an important subject of study. Diasporic writers explore themes such as displacement, nostalgia, cultural conflict, generational differences, and identity crisis. Through their works, they give voice to the emotional and psychological experiences of migrants and their descendants.

Migration has historically been central to the Indian experience, from colonial indenture to contemporary globalization. The movement of Indians across continents has produced a rich body of diaspora literature that explores the psychological, cultural, and social consequences of displacement. Indian diaspora literature articulates the tension between "roots," associated with homeland and cultural origin, and "routes," signifying journeys, migration, and transnational mobility.

The phrase 'from roots to routes' highlights the shift from fixed identities to dynamic, evolving ones shaped by movement and cross-cultural encounters. In the study of the Indian diaspora and migration, it represents a shift in how we understand identity. It moves away from the idea that identity is fixed to a single place of origin (roots) and toward the idea that identity is shaped by the journey, movement, and ongoing cultural exchanges (routes). This concept was largely popularized by the cultural theorist Paul Gilroy in his seminal work *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and later expanded upon by scholars like James Clifford and Arjun Appadurai.

In Indian diasporic literature, migration is portrayed not just as a change of address, but as a violent or transformative psychological event that reshapes a person's world. Writers often use migration as a lens to explore the "fractured self"—the idea that once you leave your home, you can never truly return, nor can you ever fully arrive in the new land. This paper examines how Indian diaspora literature portrays migration as a transformative process that complicates identity and belonging.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DIASPORA AND IDENTITY

Diasporic Studies (or Diaspora Studies) is an interdisciplinary academic field that examines the movement, settlement, and cultural evolution of dispersed populations. It investigates how people maintain connections to a real or "imagined" homeland while navigating the complexities of living in a host country. The field has evolved from focusing solely on "victim diasporas" (like the Jewish or Armenian experiences) to a much broader analysis of global mobility, identity, and transnationalism. Diaspora studies emphasize dispersion,

memory, and the negotiation of identity across borders. Scholars such as Stuart Hall view identity not as a stable essence but as a "production" that is always in process. His seminal view on identity challenges the traditional "essentialist" notion of a fixed, ancestral self by proposing that identity is an ongoing production rather than a completed fact. He distinguishes between identity as "being"—a shared sense of oneness rooted in common history—and identity as "becoming," a fluid process shaped by the interventions of history, culture, and power. For Hall, identity is never simply "discovered"; it is constituted within representation, meaning we construct who we are through the stories and discourses we use to describe ourselves. By emphasizing positionality and hybridity, Hall suggests that the migrant identity is a "Third Space" of constant transformation, where the self is perpetually redefined through its relationship with the "Other" and the specific historical context in which it speaks.

Similarly, Homi Bhabha in his influential work *The Location of Culture* (1994), introduces hybridity to describe the complex, "in-between" space that emerges when different cultures—specifically those of the colonizer and the colonized—meet and interact. His concept of hybridity underscores the creation of new cultural forms in the "third space" between cultures. Rather than seeing migration or colonization as a simple process of one culture dominating another, Bhabha argues that the encounter creates something entirely new and "contaminated," which disrupts the authority of the dominant culture. In postcolonial theory, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity is a direct challenge to the idea that any culture is "pure" or "original." Instead of viewing the relationship between a colonizer and the colonized as a simple binary (us vs. them), Bhabha argues that the interaction between the two creates something entirely new and unstable.

In Indian diaspora literature, identity emerges as fragmented and plural, shaped by nostalgia for the homeland and adaptation to the host culture. Migration thus becomes both a loss and an opportunity for redefinition.

III. MIGRATION AND THE LOSS OF ROOTS

First-generation migrants often experience an intense, visceral attachment to their homeland that is qualitatively different from that of their children. For the first generation, the homeland represents a fixed point of origin. Their identities were formed in a world where language, social status, and cultural rituals were "given" and unquestioned. In a new country, they often face "otherization" or a loss of social status (e.g., a professional in the homeland becomes a laborer in the host land). Clinging to the homeland is a way to maintain a sense of

self-esteem and continuity. The Indian diasporic literature frequently portrays this nostalgic state of mind, cultural anxiety, and alienation as migrants struggle to preserve their original traditions in unfamiliar environments. Homi Bhabha emphasizes that language is not just for communication; it is a "home." For first-generation migrants, the mother tongue carries nuances of humor, emotion, and history that the host language cannot capture. First-generation migrants often live in a state of "unhomeliness" (Bhabha's *unheimlich*), where they physically reside in the new country but mentally and emotionally "live in the past." This is why first-generation migrants are often more "traditional" than people currently living in the homeland. They "freeze" their culture at the moment of their departure, using food, religious rituals, and clothing as a defensive shield against the alienating forces of the host culture.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Ashima Ganguly's longing for India and her sense of isolation in America exemplify the migrant's emotional displacement. The homeland exists as a memory rather than a physical space, emphasizing the pain of severed roots. Ashima's longing for her homeland is a foundational example of what Homi Bhabha calls "unhomeliness." For Ashima, the "loss of roots" is not a single event but a prolonged state of being "out of sorts" in a foreign land.

Similarly, V.S. Naipaul's works reflect the psychological consequences of displacement among diasporic communities in the Caribbean, where cultural roots are fragmented due to historical migration and colonialism. In the fiction of V.S. Naipaul, displacement is rendered as a profound existential crisis where the postcolonial subject is trapped in a "void," unable to reclaim an ancestral past or fully inhabit a colonial future. This state reflects Homi Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness, particularly in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, where the protagonist's lifelong struggle to own property is a desperate attempt to anchor a "rootless" identity inherited from a history of indentured labor. Naipaul's characters often resort to mimicry, adopting the manners of the colonizer to escape their alienation; however, unlike Bhabha's view of mimicry as a subversive tool of resistance, Naipaul often portrays it as a hollow performance that leaves the individual fragmented. Ultimately, as seen in *The Enigma of Arrival*, displacement is only resolved through the creation of a Third Space of writing, where the migrant moves from a search for fixed "roots" to an acceptance of their complex "routes," finding a home not in geography, but in the act of narration.

Routes and the Formation of Hybrid Identity

While the loss of roots causes alienation, migration also opens up new routes of identity formation. While first-generation migrants often struggle with "cultural bereavement," the second generation—children born or raised in the host country—becomes the primary architects of what Homi Bhabha calls cultural hybridity. For them, hybridity is not a choice or a loss, but an organic way of life. They often negotiate multiple cultural affiliations, leading to hybrid identities.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Gogol Ganguli is the quintessential representation of the generational shift from the "uprooted" migrant to the "hybrid" citizen. While his parents, Ashoke and Ashima, live their lives through the lens of cultural bereavement—constantly looking back at a lost Calcutta—Gogol's struggle is defined by the tension of being "born across" two worlds. Unlike his parents, he does not experience India as home but as a cultural inheritance. His identity is shaped by American society as well as Indian traditions, reflecting the diasporic condition of in-betweenness.

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction offers a more radical and often more celebratory perspective. She often celebrates migration not as a state of loss or a "half-life" but a violent and exhilarating process of self-reinvention. Bharati Mukherjee offers a more radical and often more celebratory perspective. She famously distinguishes herself from writers like V.S. Naipaul (who focuses on the "wound" of displacement) by embracing the "melting pot" of America as a site of total transformation. Her protagonists embrace cultural transformation, viewing identity as fluid rather than fixed.

Language, Memory, and Cultural Negotiation

Language plays a crucial role in expressing diasporic identity. English becomes both a medium of expression and a site of cultural negotiation. Indian diaspora writers often incorporate indigenous words, cultural references, and memories of the homeland, creating a hybrid literary language. Memory functions as a bridge between roots and routes. Food, rituals, and festivals become symbolic anchors of identity, preserving cultural continuity in diasporic spaces. Literature thus becomes a repository of cultural memory that resists complete assimilation. Indian diaspora literature challenges the idea of a singular national identity. Instead, it presents belonging as multiple and shifting. Salman Rushdie's works, particularly *Imaginary Homelands*, emphasize the fragmented nature of diasporic memory and the impossibility of returning to an unaltered homeland. The diasporic subject occupies a liminal space, belonging neither entirely to the homeland nor fully to the host nation.

This condition, though unsettling, allows for creative and cultural hybridity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Despite the success stories, migration often involves a struggle for Identity. This is a central theme in Indian Diasporic Literature, where characters navigate the "in-between" space of being too Indian for their host country but too Westernized for their homeland. Indian diaspora literature vividly illustrates the movement from roots to routes as a defining feature of migrant identity. Through narratives of displacement, nostalgia, and cultural negotiation, diasporic writers reveal identity as fluid, hybrid, and continuously evolving. Migration disrupts fixed notions of belonging but also enables the creation of new cultural spaces and identities. As globalization intensifies migration, Indian diaspora literature remains a vital site for understanding the complexities of identity in a transnational world. In conclusion, the Indian diaspora is a dynamic and influential global community shaped by history, migration, and cultural interaction. It represents both continuity and change—maintaining connections with India while evolving in diverse global contexts. The study of the Indian diaspora helps in understanding globalization, multiculturalism, and the changing nature of identity in the modern world.

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